



Location, Location, Location

Alabama Angus breeder uses three working facilities to keep from hauling his cows for herd health procedures.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

Joe Williams has a demanding job description for his 300 registered and commercial cows. They must produce a quality calf every year to stay on his place. But one thing he doesn't expect them to do is travel.

"Anytime you don't have to haul a mama cow you're better off," says the Newton, Ala., Angus breeder. "It takes time to haul them, and it upsets them. You stand the chance of one getting hurt."

He adds, "Let her move on her own power. Most of the time, if she learns where to go, she'll be there before you get there."

With that in mind, Joe and his wife, Faye, have three nearly identical working facilities on their 400 acres of pasture that are spread out over 4 miles.

"I have the working facilities in a corner so I can work the cows from a number of pastures in the same facility," he explains. The

pastures feed into one facility, six pastures feed into another, and one facility, separate from their home farm, handles the cows from one pasture.

Besides keeping his cows out of a stock trailer, Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College veterinarian and animal scientist Mary Ellen Hicks says this setup can mean a teachable moment when you're moving them to a new pasture and fresh grass. "Take them through the working pen so they learn to think it is a good place," she says.

Not fancy

While the Williams' working facilities are conveniently located, they are no-frills. If electricity is needed, Joe brings a generator. There are no hydraulic chutes and only one facility has a set of scales. But, if needed, working cattle can be a one-man job.

"Help is so short he had to fix them so he

could work them by himself if necessary," Faye says. Each one of the facilities is built around a For-Most headgate, squeeze chute, palpation cage, 35-foot alleyway and sweep tub.

"For-Most is not one of the more expensive ones," Joe says. "But we don't have cows get hung up in them. It is not a good feeling to get a \$5,000 bull hung in a squeeze chute. You can't pick him up and throw him out."

Concrete with a rough, non-slip surface under the alleys and chutes helps cattle to walk without fear of slipping. The system features pens with swinging gates leading up to the tub so Joe can move cattle quietly with the gates.

"Then they aren't running all over the place," Faye notes.

Joe also uses the gates to cut out the baby calves when he is vaccinating and/or deworming their mamas so the calves don't get hurt in the alleyway.

A double gate at the loadout chute allows Joe to sort cattle four ways. He has a total of seven pens at each facility, which also aids in sorting, particularly at weaning. The central pen is larger and contains a water trough so he can hold freshly weaned calves for a couple of days until they settle down.

All three of his facilities have a roof over the alley and chute, and two have the natural shade of trees, which makes working more comfortable for the humans and cattle.

Two of the working pens also have silage bunks built around the outside for winter-feeding.

While it may seem like overkill to have the three facilities, they get used. Cows are

►**Above:** Joe and Faye Williams have three working facilities spread across their farm so they can work their cows and calves without having to move them on a trailer.



► **Left:** Joe Williams' commercial cows and calves are on the same complete vaccination program he uses for his purebred cattle.

► **Below:** Faye Williams shows off the silage bunks on the outside of the working pens.



vaccinated once a year and dewormed twice. Calves are vaccinated three times, once at processing when they are 3 to 4 months old, again at weaning, and booster vaccinations in another four weeks. Plus, most years he synchronizes and breeds around 50 head by artificial insemination (AI), which is another four trips through the chute.

The health program pays, Joe says. "Our vet bill is real cheap. We hardly have one except for something like a semen test."

The comprehensive health program is also a requirement of the marketing program he uses for his commercial calves. After they are preconditioned, Joe sells the calves in truckload lots through the Southeast Alabama Feeder Calf Marketing Association (SAFE) sale.

"We feel like it pays off in the long run," Faye says. "The buyers appreciate it."

"We feel like we get more for the calves," Joe agrees.

Those trips through the chute and the marketing opportunities are made possible because of the working facilities.

"They aren't fancy," Joe says, "But they work."



Easy does it

The most expensive, fanciest working facilities in the world can't make up for poor handling. Newton, Ala., cattleman Joe Williams insists on a calm, quiet approach.

"Be easy with them and be calm. They stay calmer, they don't get hurt, and they don't hurt you," he says.

Stress also sets off a negative chain reaction in the cow's body chemistry. Mary Ellen Hicks, veterinarian and instructor at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, Tifton, Ga., explains: "Normally, if cattle are in a situation they perceive as stressful, their heart rate goes up, their respiratory rate goes up and some researchers say their body temperature goes up."

Their cortisol level also rises, which in turn stimulates glucose production. That gears up their bodies to take flight.

Their immune system also gets suppressed. "Then, if the animal comes in contact with a bacteria or virus after it leaves the pen or squeeze chute, it is at a greater risk of getting sick," Hicks says.

All these changes also mean the bovine's body doesn't respond to vaccines as it should.

In his quest to keep cows calm and avoid those troubles, Joe has no qualms about using feed to pen his cows. He jokes, "Keep 'em hungry and hold a biscuit in front of them."

He adds, "We don't use dogs or horses. I do most of the penning by myself. They are used to me and don't pay me much attention."

He also says, "We try to breed for calm cows. We cull for that."

His wife, Faye, adds, "If she needs an attitude adjustment, she gets in a trailer and goes to the sale barn. One with a bad attitude can upset a whole pen."



► With a gate off the loading chute, Joe Williams can cut cattle four ways.



► Joe Williams uses a series of lanes and gates to easily move his cattle to the sweep tub and squeeze chute.